

## **I Love You, Too by L. Borealis**

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**Summary:** Mike had spent months being strong for El through her grief. Yet, in that final fateful moment she uttered the only words that could take away his strength. A Mike meta from the epilogue of ST3

## **I Love You, Too**

Mike had been strong for months now. Quick to give a reassuring smile, a positive spin, or a shoulder to cry on. Pulling out every ounce of energy that he could find within himself to help minimize El's pain. Some days it was just a positive attitude. Some days it was a light hearted joke. Some days it was a silent hour with his arms around her on the couch, saying nothing at all.

He honestly didn't know where he'd found the strength. Because if he was honest with himself, which he rarely was at the moment, he was dying inside.

He pushed it aside, yet it plagued him with more pressure each and every day. It felt as though a piece of him was slowly ripping away, pulling from his chest more and more as that fateful date grew nearer on the calendar. It made him sick, his stomach churning in a physical pain since his emotions had nowhere else to go.

Still, he'd kept them hidden from her. Tucked away behind a positive outlook and a straight back. Because there was no way that he was going to burden El with any of it. She had it so much worse. She didn't need to also find the energy to comfort him. What she needed was his strong shoulder and his reassuring confidence that everything was going to be alright. His firm hand to hold. His promise that things between them wouldn't change, even within the miles that were about to stretch between them.

She deserved that, so he gave it to her. Through late nights on the Byers' porch, encouraging her to make new friends in her new town, to watching Miami Vice with her while she sniffled quietly against his shoulder, her usual watching buddy now long gone...

Anything she needed, Mike had been there to deliver. Firm, committed, encouraging. Stable.

...even though he knew he was anything but.

As that final day progressed, the corners of his eyes tightened with each box that he loaded. They pinched in an effort to chase away the

tears that he refused to show her. His chest ached with a compounding intensity, growing worse with each tick of the clock. He just hoped that he could keep up the act until she got in that truck, sending her off with a smile on her face and a small ray of hope in her heart.

Of course, that was not the way of things.

Because here she stood, on this final day, in these final moments, stopping his breath as she locked him with her big beautiful eyes and began to dance around the singular topic that was simply too heavy for him to hold.

Those words. Those words that had flown from his mouth with full volume in a moment of utmost frustration and fear. Those words that, after it all, felt too big to utter. Too dangerous. Too painful.

Because he did. Oh God, how he did. More than he could hope to manage. He loved hers dimple when she smiled. Her dry jokes. Her rapt attention when he taught her a new word. He loved her laugh, her blunt honesty, the feel of her hand in his. He loved the way she looked at him, with those sparkling eyes that made him feel like he was exactly where he needed to be.

Because where he needed to be... was by her side... A space that was about to grow astronomically impossible to scale.

Yet here she was, fearless as always in the face of danger and pain, as she introduced those very words to the thin air that laid between them.

She stepped toward him. Surety in her gaze. A soft smile on her lips. A hand to his face as burning words danced upon her voice.

"I love you, too."

Each word fell upon his ear like a bomb, stunning him with their reverberation. She stole his breath, froze his gaze, and locked his arms with more power than she'd ever thrown at him before.

He saw her move to him like he was watching her in a movie. Her lips were on his, her lashes closing over her eyes, her face serene and

honest as she kissed him.

How had he never looked at her like this? So close? The exact sweep of her eyebrows? The small scar on her forehead? The feeling of her nose pressing lightly into his cheek? How had he never taken the time to memorize her? Her every angle? From every view? How her breath felt as it skirted across his lips? The exact way her fingers wove through his hair? The way her eyes eased open as she pulled away, lingering for the softest second in a moment he wished he could bottle and return to forever?

Yet, as quickly as she'd kissed him, she was gone. Already out the door. And it was only in her absence, in the fresh memory of her lips, that the words finally found their way to his heart.

...I love you, too...

Mike shook as tears finally welled in his eyes. His bones stiffened and his lungs heaved. His chest cracked with a fatal blow that he could not contain. It came in a rush, riding on her words like a tidal wave. Everything he'd been trying to hide from. Every feeling he'd been pushing away.

Everything he did not know how to do.

Because how? How could he handle missing someone as much as he was going to miss her? How would he sleep? How would he eat? How would he move onto the next day? And the next? And the next?

How would he survive without the person that he loved? Who... loved him too?

His lips trembled under the weight of her words. Yet somewhere, hidden deep within his grief, the slightest saddest hint of a smile rose. Unbidden, startling, yet light as air.

She loved him. Somehow, this amazing girl loved him. With his lanky frame and his stupid jokes and his... well... him.

She loved him.

He did not know how to do any of what was being asked of him. It

hurt too much to even think of what the next day would feel like.

But he knew one thing.

He would figure it out.

He had to.

Because he loved her. And even if she was a million miles away, he refused to lose her again.